Craft in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Assemblings combine the insistence on both artisanal craft and, paradoxically, global coverage by mechanized reproduction. In this sense, assemblings represent a special place in twentieth century art because they chart the emergence of *craft in the age of mass production*. The artists flaunt their fetishism of print and bookmaking alongside their fascination with huge bureaucratic systems of production and distribution. The artists cherish the production of carefully constructed individualized visual poems and constructions as well as the insistence that readers recuperate, recycle, plagiarize, and forever alter these codes and messages. Often an artists’ periodical will surprise the reader with the assembler’s and contributor’s care and craft. One would assume that these works would challenge any aesthetic care because the assemblings explicitly reject traditional aesthetic categories and institutional structures. In fact, much of this work has a much more complicated relationship to craft, craftwork, and aesthetics.

An issue of the assembling *Amphichroia* (20) uses color as a dimension of poetry. Poets, and even media artists, usually consider color as an ornamental quality secondary to the meaning of a story. In this issue, works use color to create poetic connections and meanings. In a visual play by Terrence Ames, the colors, found images, and a scattering of captions combine to present scenes without dialogue. Because we usually only connect colors to symbolic meanings in traffic lights and signs, colors usually only appear in art and literature as an ornamental element of printing craft and processes. Color might add
to an aesthetic appreciation, but it rarely functions as part of a linguistic poetry. In this issue, color appears first as a delightful element of craft; with the explicit interest in using color for poetic purposes, an element of craft functions poetically and conceptually. In Bruce Wohl’s type-writer poem, “BLUSH” (20), that word is typed eleven times in a vertical row. The color red spreads into the vertically arranged print, literally and figuratively spelling out “blush.” Geoffrey Cook’s “Ode to the Great California Drought of ’77” produces a similar effect by tightly typing the repeated word “drought” in a pattern that bleeds over the edge of both sides of the page to produce more than a three-inch width band of type on the page. Through these oppressive repetitions of the word “drought” is a little stream of red type in the pattern of the word “water” almost evaporating before the reader’s eyes.

The assembling *Busta Sorpresa* (26) that began appearing in the 1990s includes delicately hand produced folders with various different ties or closures. Issue two uses a red cardboard piece through the two holes to keep the folder sealed. The issues include pictures produced with colored inks, handwriting, collage, rubberstamps, and sewing. Each picture is carefully mounted in a unique way. Issue number twenty comes in a little plastic box, nine and one-half inches by six and one-half inches. This assembling appears in small editions of fifty. In *Busta Sorpresa* the works’ tactility makes them more fetishistic than the mass-produced feel of many mail art assemblings. For example, one contribution in issue number twenty consists of a piece of brown paper towel with a string through it and paint and other pieces of tissue paper
placed behind it. The tactility creates an intimacy with the producer that can neither be reproduced in a flat picture, nor captured in description. Without the craftwork, the contributions are just like other mail art. Because the works in this assembling are often multicolored and mounted on various unique kinds of paper, even the most banal objects have a preciousness that is not about the prettiness of kitsch but about an intimacy which again does not photocopy. With the craftwork, this assembling challenges the anti-aesthetic assemblings it resembles.

Instead of advocating low-tech mass production, this assembling sends the absolutely unique as a way to celebrate the intimate connection between artist and reader. The meaning of these works is secondary to the craftwork as conceptual art.

The most successful project involving craft as conceptual art involved the Cracker Jack Kid (alluding to the “surprise in every package” slogan) (a.k.a. Chuck Welch). Welch edited the special issue of Commonpress (19) on “material metamorphosis.” The project involved one hundred artists from sixteen countries. Each sent a favorite piece of clothing. The items were shredded and pulverized into cotton rag pulp and then processed into purple watermarked paper and envelopes. The results were sent to the participants. Each participant was asked to comment on the project as it relates to self-identity.

In a folder with a photo on the cover, Welch includes two small envelopes. One labeled “material evidence” contains small pieces of cloth; the other, “evidence of transition,” contains paper fragments. The paper is also stamped with a bird-shaped cancel mark. There are two other larger envelopes with these bird-shaped cancel stamps. The

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phrase “material metamorphosis” appears in the cancel circle. From his home at the time in Omaha, Nebraska, Welch explains that “this issue of Commonpress is a documentation of material metamorphosis, a one-year project combining paper making and mail art. Having been a paper maker and active mail artist for several years, I improvised a way to combine both artforms in the format of an international mail art exchange and exhibition.” Each participant sent a favorite old piece of cotton clothing, and an anecdote about the material. Cracker Jack Kid made the material into paper envelopes that he then sent back to the participants. Welch then compiled the entire process as both an exhibit and as an assembling. Welch explains that in the case of Vagnrich Bakhchanyan “no story was returned with metamorphosed envelope but a Russian newspaper article was found in the envelope with a picture of Lenin.” Other participants include Vittore Baroni, Buster Cleveland, Robin Crozier, and Ray Johnson. Bern Porter, the well-known and influential experimental poet, explains that “the webbed material I sent you is part of underwear. I cut with scissors the front and back of the underwear. The webbed material is two sides of the underwear. I wore that underwear for years and the older it got, the more droopy it became. It stretched and stretched and has or had no sentimental value. The day you telephoned that underwear was in the kitchen garbage bag at the bottom of the bug.” Porter includes his title as “Director of Institute of Advanced Thinking.” What is amazing about this irreverent answer to Welch’s request is that the exquisite craftsmanship transformed old underwear into paper, and then transformed this craft into a dialogue among the participants. In this project, craft does not simply ornament the process, nor does it make a conceptual artwork pretty. The transformative craftwork functions as conceptual art in a socio-poetic work. Craft functions as the crucial element in a work about memory, memorialization, community, and the disjunction involved in transformations.

Because the contributing artists in assemblings often work outside more traditional artworld contexts and market forces, the works produced sometimes resemble both fine paper and printing craft, as in the Commonpress issue mentioned above, as well as more modest handicrafts. Because these artists depend on the postal system rather than the gallery system, they sometimes live in rural communities far from art markets. One assembler, who lives and works in a rural mountainous area of Pennsylvania, told me that he has difficulty traveling far from his home during the winter months. Yet his network of collaborators extended around the globe. These assemblings often literally, rather than simply figuratively, represent life on the fringe. They literally suggest how isolated geographic locations can function as decentralized nodes in the formation of a fringe culture.

Because the craftwork depends on networks of other artists, the works also resemble self-conscious sophisticated conceptual art rather than ornamental crafts. To understand the peculiar nature of the craft involved in these works, and the surprising importance of craft in the late twentieth century, one needs to understand the influence of these artists’ networks and collaborations. Some of these periodicals flaunt a slipshod anti-aesthetic montaging photocopies of montages of found materials (usually from the mass media). Others attempted to
distribute larger and more complicated contributions. Sometimes the contributions resemble fine press books. Sometimes they are stapled photocopies. Sometimes the “books” are three-dimensional objects. Compared to traditional publishing, these periodicals depended on relatively rigorous artisanal techniques even while they engaged directly with issues highlighted by film and electronic media. Focusing on the conceptual work about how we understand contemporary culture and communication systems, a critic might easily overlook the handmade quality of many of these works.

**Intimate Bureaucracies**

Many of the key figures of contemporary art participated in assemblings, especially during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Theorists have ignored these works in spite of the fact that writers like Marshall McLuhan (see illus. opposite preface), John Cage, Roland Barthes, and Susan Sontag produced important work for these publications, as well as guest editing or designing individual issues. Andy Warhol’s participation in a special issue of *Aspen* (41, see illus. page 4), for example, indicates that these periodicals played a role in Pop art as well as Fluxus and other art movements. The more noticeable and remarkable emergence of this form appears in the avant-gardes of the late 1960s and 1970s. Later, in the 1980s, the form became more widely disseminated. These serialized collections of books and experimental art reached maturity in the 1990s with two trends. Some serializations, like I.S.C.A.’s (International Society of Copier Artists) “artists’ books” serials (27) attempt to mass-market these works, while